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SUBJECT: Food Supply in Southern Taiwan Faces Scrutiny

REF: A)Taipei 2997 B) Taipei 3566

1. The food supply in Taiwan has come under increasing scrutiny following reports of more dioxin-contaminated duck and fish products (refTel A), commercially raised fish contaminated with the carcinogen, malachite green, and large additional amounts of diseased pork (refTel B). Moreover, most of the disposable chopsticks used in the marketplace have been found to be contaminated with bleaching agents. The Taiwan Consumer Foundation has called on the government to implement stricter controls, after previous measures failed to keep dioxin and malachite green contaminated foodstuffs out of the market.

Contaminated Fish

2. According to Shih Shen-lung, Division Chief of the Taiwan Council of Agriculture (COA) Fishery Agency, tests on commercially raised grouper from 14 fish farms in Pingtung, Kaohsiung and Tainan Counties revealed that the fish raised in Pingtung and Tainan was contaminated with malachite green, a known carcinogen. The substance is used to prevent infections in the fish. After further tests revealed that sixty percent of the grouper in the Taipei market was contaminated with malachite green, the COA ordered all grouper removed from the markets and placed a one-week moratorium on sales. During the intervening week, the COA implemented an inspection system, with the fish that passed the inspection being certified as free from contamination so that the fish could reenter the market.

3. After a week, grouper returned to the market, but skeptical consumers caused sales to drop by eighty percent. Their fears turned out to be well founded when, less than one week after the grouper returned to the market, Carrefour, the island's largest retailer, determined that grouper it had purchased was contaminated with malachite green. An investigation revealed that fish farmers had transferred certification tags from inspected fish to fish that had not been checked.

4. Shih insisted that the existing inspection systems for grouper destined for export ensured that the exported fish were safe for consumption. However, Hong Kong officials recently detected malachite green in Taiwan-produced fish and halted their importation and sale. The combined loss of domestic and overseas sales has had a major impact on the USD 85 million per year commercial grouper industry.

Contaminated Pork

5. On 14 September 2005, police seized over 2,000 kg of diseased pork products at an illegal abattoir in Tainan County. Police arrested eight suspects who admitted to purchasing the facility, which had previously been used to dispose of hogs with foot and mouth disease. They purchased dead and diseased pigs from local farmers and processed the animals into sausage for sale in the local market. Based on information provided by the suspects, police subsequently raided another facility in Tainan County, seizing 120 diseased pigs, over 1000 kg of sausage, and several thousand kg of diseased meat which was awaiting further processing. The group estimated that they had processed and sold 120,000 kg of diseased pork in the period from purchasing the facility in February 2005 to the time of the raid.

6. Taiwan's EPA has recently adopted a recycling program in which table waste from local households is collected and processed for hog feed. This mandatory program has been in effect since June of this year. The EPA states that the waste is heated to high temperatures to kill germs and is safe for use. The COA, however, suspects the waste is causing an increase in hog morbidity and has asked for its termination. The Taiwan EPA recently agreed to end the program in January of 2006.

Contaminated Ducks

7. Dioxin also continues to plague Taiwan's food supply. For the second time in three months, the COA has detected

dioxin-contaminated duck products in Changhua County. The tested samples of both duck meat and duck eggs had dioxin at levels of more than 7pg/g, more than double the safe level set by the European Union. As previously reported (ref:tel A), Taiwan has yet to establish clear standards. In the present case, COA officials culled more than 3,000 ducks and 150,000 duck eggs. COA officials said that they suspect contaminated feed and are investigating. However, previous investigations point to emissions from a local steel ash recycling plant. Despite claiming that airborne pollutants did not contribute to the incident, COA has begun testing rice, fruits, vegetables and seafood from farms in the area to determine if they are polluted.

18. In further reports from Changhua, Taiwan health officials have begun testing farmers in the area for dioxin levels. Initial results indicate that most farmers in the area have high dioxin levels. The dioxin is believed to be due to their consumption of contaminated agricultural products. This is particularly worrisome, since Changhua County is the largest supplier of agricultural products to the Taipei market.

19. As previously reported, the COA has banned fishing and fish farming in the dioxin-polluted areas of Tainan. This has prompted former residents of the area to return to the area in an attempt to claim compensation. Media footage and interviews indicate that many of these people, finding the compensation insufficient to make a living, have resorted to fishing in the polluted areas to supplement the compensation. Taiwan's Consumer Foundation has criticized the government for failing to make any effort to enforce the fishing ban.

Chopsticks

10. Finally, the government has begun to inspect supplies of disposable chopsticks used in the restaurants of Taiwan. Most of the chopsticks have been found to be contaminated with bleaching agents. Officials are investigating to determine if the contamination is taking place in the manufacturing process, or if local vendors are bleaching and recycling used chopsticks.

11. Comment. The continued revelations of contamination in foodstuffs produced for both the domestic and export markets are not only a threat to agri-business interests in Taiwan, but also a source of concern for AIT staff who purchase food in the local marketplace. Government enforcement efforts and reassurances are of little comfort. Despite inspection systems, both domestic and export grouper are still contaminated and, despite major seizures, a huge amount of diseased pork continues to find its way into the food supply. Police estimate that they are finding less than half of the contaminated pork being processed. End Comment.

Thiele

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